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KONGBO AREA

Kongbo is the name of an ancient administrative district or province of southeastern Tibet. Its boundaries are somewhat indefinite but for the purposes of this study are defined as extending roughly from 29°N to 30°30'N and west to east from about 93° to 95°E. The most important areas within Kongbo are the inhabited river valleys which include the Giamda and its tributaries, the Tsangpo from its junction with the Giamda at the town of Tsela Dzong to about 95°E where the river enters its gorge, and to the north, the western tributaries of the Po Tsangpo -- the Yigrong, Tongkyuy, and Rong. Kongbo is bordered on the east by the heavily forested Pomi area -- a region of snow peaks and deep gorges -- and to the south over the crest of the Great Himalaya Range by the little known Pemako area lying astride the massive gorge of the Tsangpo.

Kongbo is an important area to the Chinese Communists: the vital Szechwan-Tibet road crosses through it, utilizing the valleys of the Rong and Giamda rivers; sizable timber reserves needed for construction in Tibet are present; and in some of the valleys unused land offers limited opportunities for increasing agricultural output. Administratively, the Chinese have grouped Kongbo, Pomil, and Pemako into the Lin-chih special administrative district, the headquarters of which are located at Lin-chih, situated in the Giamda Valley several miles north of Tsela Dzong.

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# I. Terrain and Vegetation

Kongbo is a rugged, mountainous area in which high alpine ridges and peaks rise 5,000 feet or more above the floors of the major river valleys. The inter-fluvial divides that separate major river systems, are, for the most part, relatively broad and consist of extensive areas of jagged snow peaks, occasional glaciers, and alpine lakes. The breadth of these mountain masses have tended to isolate the principal river valleys where the agricultural populace resides. The Gianda-Tsangpo divide, for example, apparently has no passes that permit north-south communications between the two valleys. Similarly, there appears to be no route north from the Gianda valley between the Temo La (used by the Szechwan-Tibet road) and the water gap of the Shokha Chu -- a distance of roughly 60 miles.

The major river valleys of Kongbo range in elevation from about 9,000 to 11,000 feet and for most of their length have relatively wide valleys. The valley of the Gyanda below the town of Gianda (or T'ai-chao) gradually widens downstream until in its lower course it reaches a width of 1 to 2 miles, separated into several channels during low water. Similarly, the Tsangpo flows in a wide valley near the confluence with the Gianda, continuing east to the village of Pe (elevation about 9,600 feet), where the valley narrows as the river begins its steep descent through misty gorges to the Indian plains.

Numerous, short tributary streams originate in the snowfields of the high mountains. Although these streams often flow through narrow ravines in their lower courses, the upper valleys typically are relatively straight and

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U-shaped, reflecting their glacial origin and shaping. In places, glacial rubble of sand, gravel, and boulders block these upper valleys to form small lakes.

Most of Kongbo below 14,000 or 15,000 feet has some vegetative cover of scrub or forest, but the amount and variety depends on factors of elevation, exposure, and location within Kongbo. In the drier and higher northwestern portion of Kongbo, oak and juniper scrub predominates and only in a few protected glens are there small stands of coniferous trees. In contrast, the much heavier precipitation and generally lower elevations of southeastern Kongbo support extensive stands of evergreen forests. Typically, the valleys of the major streams in Kongbo have only a scanty covering of thorn, oak, and Juniper with trees found only where they have been planted around the villages. A few hundred feet to a thousand feet above the valley floors, however, scrub vegetation merges into forest vegetation that consists of mixed deciduous (maple, poplar, birch) and evergreen species at the lower elevations, changing to larch, spruce, and fir forests at higher elevations. The ubiquitous rhododendron extends above the coniferous tree line (about 14,000 feet) and is the common understory in all forest associations.

Foot travel in Kongbo largely is confined to river valleys and existing paths across the uplands. As noted, the mountainous water divides consists of extensive alpine terrain and, apparently, very few passes exist that permit north-south travel from one major river valley to another. Locally, however, off-trail foot travel, though difficult in places, would be possible with the degree of difficulty increasing to the south and east where river valleys become deeper and slopes steeper.

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Travel during spring and summer will be facilitated by mild temperatures, but in the warmer months frequent rains and boggy conditions in the valleys will also handicap travel. Rivers normally will be in flood stage during August and into September, and the Gianda this season will fill its 2 to 3 mile wide valley. Many of the smaller streams will be treacherous to ford from late spring and through the summer because they are fed to some extent by meltwater from permanent snowfields. The usual precaution of crossing early in the day to avoid the daily rise in the water level should be observed. In the extreme eastern portion of Kongbo and in lower Yigrong river gorges are commonly crossed by the rope bridge method.

Winter travel is enervating because of the cold temperatures and strong valley winds. In autumn and winter, however, travel in valleys will be easier than in spring and summer because the turf will be dried or frozen. Snowfalls should not be a problem to travel in lower valleys and on slopes, but at the higher elevation snow will occasionally hinder getting about. The few passes in central and western Kongbo are not closed during winter -- with the exception of a day or so following a severe storm. In southeastern Kongbo, snow probably clogs the passes for several months and it is questionable whether some can be crossed without considerable difficulty during winter.

II. Climate. -- Variations in temperature and precipitation in Kongbo result from differences in elevation and location. No meteorological records are available for stations in Kongbo. Most of the Gianda Valley, however, is comparable in altitude and latitude to Lhasa; consequently, the accompanying tables for Lhasa may be expected to approximate conditions in the lower valleys

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of central and western Kongbo. For other areas, climatic generalizations are based on fragmentary records kept by explorers in their travels.

Although winter temperatures in the Gianda Chu Valley and other valleys at elevations of about 10,000 feet should approximate those of Lhasa, there is some reason to believe that Lhasa temperatures are somewhat on the warm side -- apparently because Lhasa is located in a protected valley. It is probable that readings in the Kongbo valleys may drop occasionally to 0° to -5°F (in contrast to the absolute minimum of 7° at Lhasa) although the usual winter minimum normally will be in the 15°F to 20°F range. In the upper valleys at 13,000 to 14,000 foot elevations, minimum readings should average 5°F to 10°F colder than those cited for the valleys. Winter temperatures will vary greatly depending on exposure. Considerable protection will be offered by coniferous forests, while in the larger, open valleys strong winter winds will accentuate the cold. Summer readings are probably about the same as those for Lhasa, although nighttime temperatures may drop to the 40's. As in all parts of Tibet, great variations occur between day and night readings, and the high elevations and rarified air make for hot temperatures in the sun but chilly conditions in the shade.

Precipitation amounts in Kongbo increase from west to east and from north to south, with annual amounts estimated to range from 20 to over 40 inches. Southeastern Kongbo is on the margin between the rain-drenched Pomi and Penako areas and the drier, continental regime characteristic of most of Tibet. The moisture-laden summer monsoon pushes northwards into Tibet through the gap created by the gorge of the Tsangpo as far upstream as Gyala (9,200 feet), which marks the approximate border between Pomi and Kongbo.

5

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The Great Himalaya Range, however, blocks a direct invasion of the monsoon from the south, although the southern side of the Tsangpo Valley in Kongbo received noticeably greater rainfall, as reflected in the more extensive vegetation as compared to the northern side of the valley. As in other areas of Tibet, rain is concentrated in the period from June through September.

Winter snows probably are light in the lower, protected valleys, but the frequency, amount, and duration of snow and snow cover increases rapidly in the upper valleys -- particularly to the southeast. Permanent snowfields and occasional glaciers drape the higher elevations -- down to 16,000 feet in the southeast.

The tables for clear and cloudy days at Lhasa are indicative of conditions in the lower valleys of central and western Kongbo. At higher elevations and in the southeast, however, considerably more cloudy weather is common. The passes over the Great Himalay Range to Penako, for example, are said to be cloaked in mist and drizzle most of the time.

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IV. Clothing

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The type of clothing worn in Kongbo varies a bit from other areas of Tibet. The following description is taken from the book "Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges," written by Kingdon Ward who explored Kongbo in the 1920's.

"Just as in many parts of Tibet the universal garment is a sort of loose dressing-gown called a chuma, so in Kongbo the universal garment is a gushuk. Summer and winter, day and night, by men and women, rich and poor, the gushuk is worn. Take a strip of thick woollen cloth about 8 feet long and 18 inches wide; make a hole in the centre large enough to put your head through, and there you are, complete with gushuk. Sleeves? All you need do is to put your head through the hole, haul up 2 feet of slack fore and aft, fasten a belt round your waist, allowing the slack to bag over, and you have a model dress; the fashionable colour is a dull maroon red. Of course you wear more than one gushuk, at least in winter. When dirty, reverse and repeat. When cold, wear two gushuks, or three. When wet, wear a goatskin gushuk over the woollen one, hair inside; when fine, reverse the goatskin; when hot, wear one gushuk, pulling it well up above the knees. At night, undo the belt, and the surplus fold falls to the ground, making a long robe in which you roll yourself. It is a wonderful garment, the right thing at the right price. Men, women, and children enjoy it.

"The fashion for men is a shorter skin gushuk and tight breeches of the same material, tucked inside long cloth boots. Hats are also worn in Kongbo; wide-brimmed, low-crowned circular hats like a parson's, made of white or black yak hair.

"The belt consists of a strip of leather with carved silver and brass buckles threaded on it. These belts are made in Lunang and are beautiful examples of the metal-workers craft. Men wear their hair short, though it is often curly. Women have long hair, parted in the middle, glossy with butter, and pulled tightly back. Pill-box caps set jauntily on the side of the head are worn in fine weather, and hair hats in wet."

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SELECTED CLIMATIC STATISTICS FOR LHASA\*

Mean Monthly Temperatures (°F.)

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Oct</u>
Lhasa	31	48	62	49

Length of record -- Lhasa 11 yrs.

Mean Maximum Temperatures (°F.)

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Oct</u>
Lhasa	46	62	75	63

Length of record -- Lhasa 10 yrs.

Mean Minimum Temperatures (°F.)

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Oct</u>
Lhasa	20	36	52	36

Length of record -- Lhasa 10 yrs.

Number of Days Temperature Below Freezing

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Oct</u>
Lhasa	20	0	0	0

Length of record-- 5 yrs.

Absolute Minimum Temperatures (°F.)

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Oct</u>
Lhasa	7	20	44	24

Length of record -- Lhasa 10 yrs.

\* Lhasa 29°43'N, 91°02'E. Elevation approximately 3658.0 meters/11,998 feet. Records are for periods of 9 to 11 years, except maximum snow accumulation for which statistics for only 2 years are available.

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Amount of Precipitation (Inches)\*

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sep</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>	<u>Total</u>
Lhasa	.60	.15	.51	.87	4.20	7.69	20.10	14.51	8.47	.97	.02	.00	57.49

Length of record -- Lhasa 10 yrs.

Average Number of Days With  
Over 0.1 Millimeter of Precipitation

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sep</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>
Lhasa	0	1	2	4	9	12	19	19	14	4	0	0

Length of record -- Lhasa 11 yrs.

Maximum Snow Accumulation (Inches)

	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sep</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>
Lhasa	0	0	0	0	0	1.18	.19	.39	.94	1.18	0	0

Length of record -- 2 yrs.

Average Number of Clear Days

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sep</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>
Lhasa	15	10	5	5	3	3	2	2	5	15	20	21

Length of record -- 9 yrs.

Average Number of Cloudy Days

	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sep</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>
Lhasa	3	4	6	9	9	12	20	17	11	5	1	1

Length of record -- 9 yrs.

\* The high summer precipitation averages are the result of one year (1936) when reportedly 198 inches of rain fell. Obviously, this was exceptional. Based on records for other years, the normal amount of precipitation would be approximately 1 to 3 inches during May, June, and September, and from 3 to 10 inches during July and August, giving a yearly total of around 20 inches.

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